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Inside Edition: A Thought-Provoking Review of Inmate Art and Writing

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*A thought-
provoking review
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Inside Edition

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“Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage,” the English poet Richard Lovelace wrote in the 17th century. Much has changed since then, of course, but the spirit of those lines — the idea that the creative spirit can flourish even behind the jailer’s bars — continues today.

Writer Fielding Dawson knows that spirit firsthand. As chairman of the PEN Prison Writing Committee, Dawson for 10 years has been working with inmates of some of America’s toughest prisons. In these harsh conditions, he finds writing and artwork of astonishing skill, variety and power.

Dawson spoke about his experiences with imprisoned artists and writers during a visit sponsored by UB Law School’s Prison Task Force, in conjunction with the National Lawyers Guild, the David Gray Chair of Poetry and Letters and Just Buffalo Literary Center.

“What Fielding Dawson does is a different side of what inmates are normally portrayed as,” said Kathi S. Westcott ’94, coordinator of the Prison Task Force last year. “Oftentimes, we

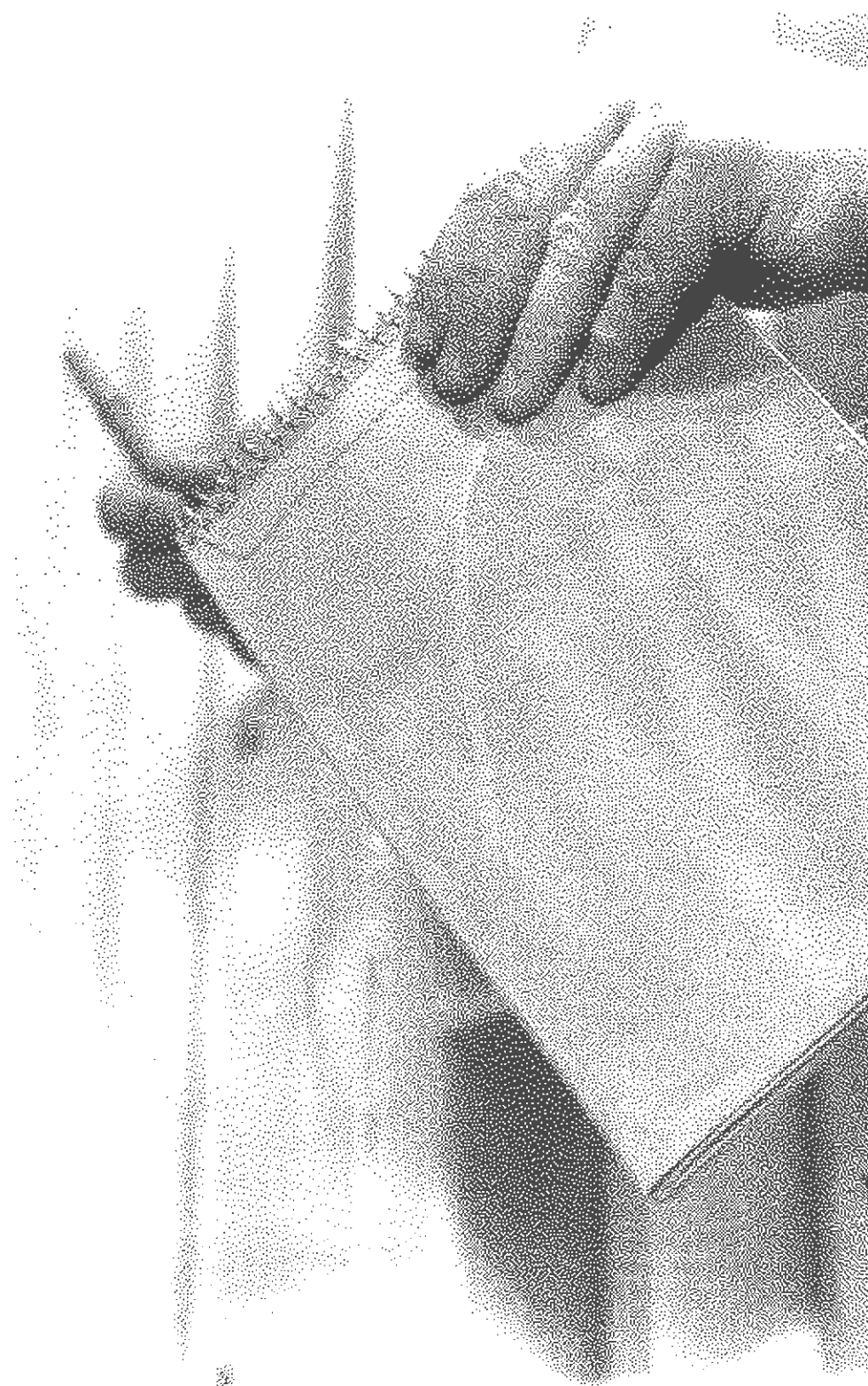
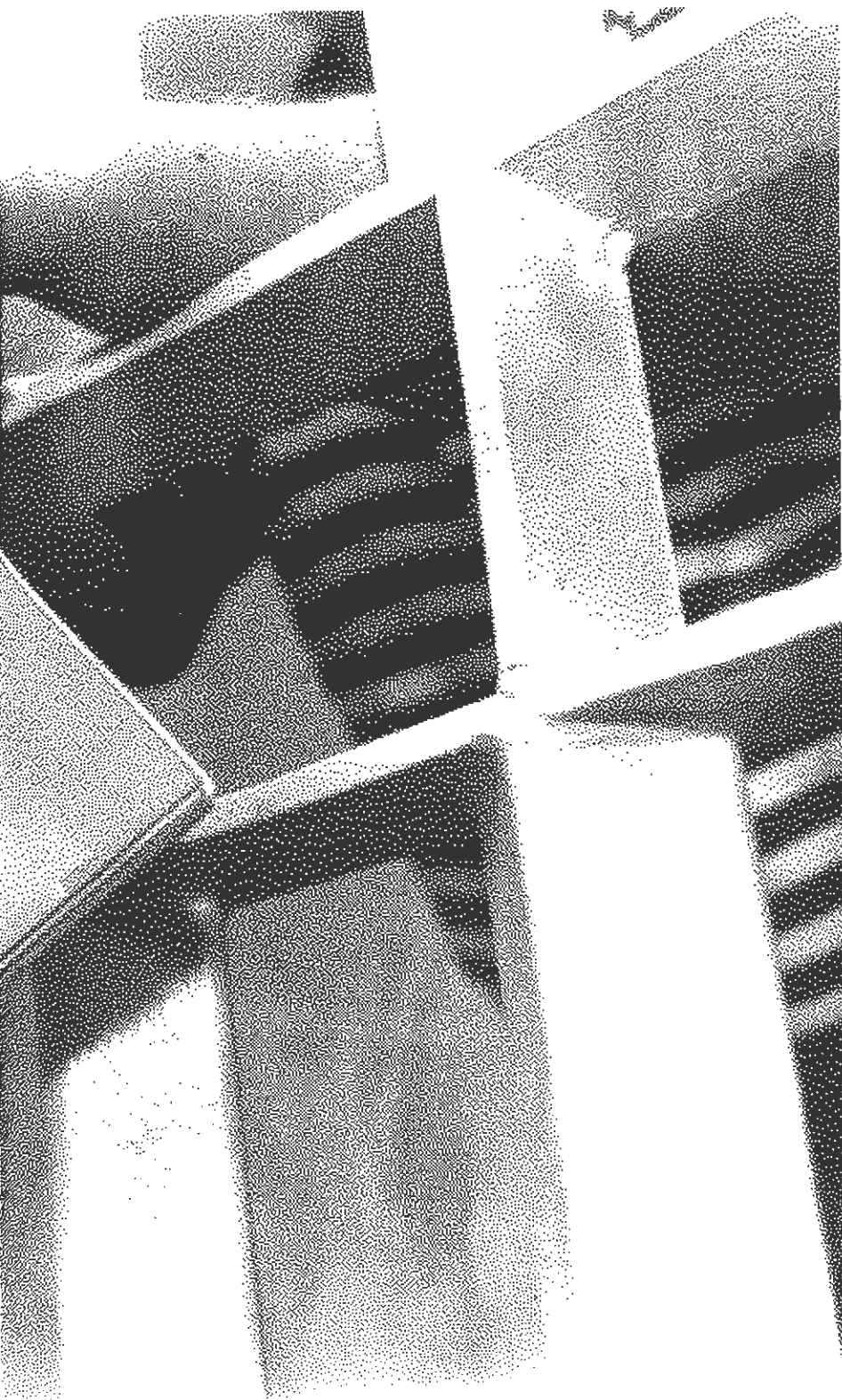


PHOTO BY MIKE GROLL



encounter that same type of creativity when we go into the prisons to teach legal research methods to inmates."

PEN, a support organization for creative writers, formed its Prison Writing Committee in response to the deadly riot at New York's Attica State Correctional Facility in 1972. Since then it has held a yearly competition to recognize the best prison artwork and writing. Dawson's presentation, which was as much a performance as a lecture, highlighted some of the winners of that competition.

"Without poetry and art there is nothing beautiful, sensitive, aware or inspired," he said. But "these convicts cringe in doing their creations, even from themselves, not to mention their fellow convicts and the wardens."

Prison life is hard on the creative spirit, Dawson said. Inmates "are shifted from prison to prison; their bodily rights are violated; their works are confiscated and destroyed ... and still they write. ... Criticism can come in the blade of a knife or a punch in the face. ... No other class in America is subject to the totalitarian controls that are put upon the writers in our prisons."

Visual artists, especially, are stymied by the scarcity of materials in Attica, Sing Sing and the other prisons Dawson visits. "Prison censorship of (art) materials coming in is getting worse by the day," he said.

Nevertheless, the inmates keep giving voice to their creative spirit — expressing the pain they feel, and rebelling against the enforced conformity of prison life.

Dawson said it's rare for an imprisoned artist or writer to continue the work when he's released. In prison, there is plenty of time and none of the distractions of making a living; back in society, he said, often art gets pushed aside.

Dawson read excerpts from several prize-winning inmate stories — "What Is a Grandmother," "A Dream," "In the Mess Hall." He marveled at the

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rapid-fire rhythm of a story called "A Cat Fight in Quentin," about one cat chasing another against a background of barbed wire at San Quentin Penitentiary. "If you think that doesn't sound like Jack Kerouac," he said, "you're wrong."

And he showed slides of some compelling artwork by inmates:

- * "Attitude," a pouty-lipped, sunglasses-wearing woman in the style of Antonio Vargas, but with her head wrapped in barbed wire and posed in front of a giant eyeball.

- * "Albatross," a sketchily drawn jail with a giant bird dropping the key to freedom to a second bird inside.

- * Sketches of the Hudson River by Sing Sing inmate Anthony Papa, the idyllic clouds, mountains and sailboats set off in stark contrast by barbed wire in the foreground.

- * An astonishing self-portrait of a face constructed of a stone wall, opening above into a broken sunrise. The artist, Stephen Wayne Anderson, has been on Death Row in San Quentin for 13 years. Anderson also wrote a poem, "Friday Crabs," that ends lyrically: "I took with me, hidden in my pocket, the poet's pen." "This," said Dawson, "is a poet who will die."

In response to questions, Dawson said he never asks the inmates what they did to land themselves in prison. "It's really none of my business," he said, though he does encourage them to write about their lives, and sometimes their crimes come out in that exercise.

These are people, he said, who are "trapped in unhealthy bodies, with terrible backgrounds, behind high walls. ... They learn faster, with keener recognition, than any students I've ever taught. Anywhere.

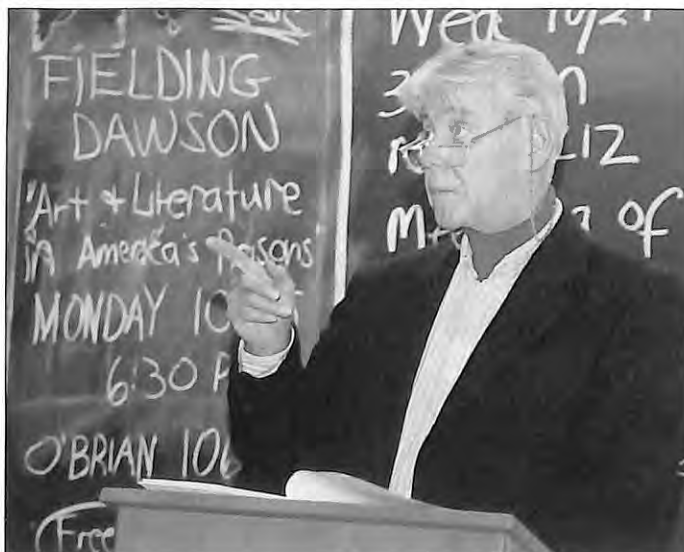
"In the arts there are no boundaries. You are what you are."

Because of state budget cuts, said Kathi Westcott of the Prison Task Force, the number of education programs like this inside prisons has

dropped dramatically. "There probably should be other things happening in prisons," she said, "not just warehousing, a place to sleep within walls."

One continuing program is the Prison Task Force's work at seven correctional facilities, including those at Albion, Orleans, Wyoming and Attica. Westcott said the task force has between 50 and 60 students visiting the prisons to teach legal research and writing.

"Any time you can educate someone, however you educate them — teaching them legal research, or teach-



*Fielding
Dawson*

ing them how to read a book — I think you're going to improve society," she said.

"I think it also helps law students to understand the criminal justice system a little better when they go into a prison and meet inmates face to face. It's not a number and not a name. It's an actual person in flesh and blood."

Westcott, who became involved in the Prison Task Force during her first year at UB Law School, also said the work is never boring.

"Once I got into it, I found it was a very good way to meet interesting people," she said. "These guys all have great stories." ■